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A Future Shattered as Vietnam Fell

Ed Weimer's problems began 10 years ago in Saigon, a few months before the city fell, when he saw Le Hoang riding by in a pedicab.

That chance encounter was to lead—by a circuitous, bureaucratically booby-trapped route—to heartbreak, frustration and loss of his job, followed years later by a nervous breakdown.

Weimer lists his occupation as "retired U.S. spy." He was employed by the supersecret National Security Agency in Saigon when he caught his first, fleeting glimpse of the beautiful young woman in the bicycle-drawn rickshaw. He waved and she smiled. Then she disappeared in traffic.

By another chance—the kind of coincidence that makes security officers uneasy—Weimer saw her later that day while he was sitting on the veranda of the Continental Palace Hotel. This time he hurried up to her, asked her name—and fell in love.

Weimer wanted to marry Le Hoang but he knew he'd lose his top-secret job if he did. He couldn't even tell her where he worked or what he did.

Three months later, as chaos descended on the South Vietnamese capital, Weimer tried to get Le Hoang evacuated with other American dependents. He was turned down.

"On the day I left, I can remember my bags were packed, and we were both sitting on the steps of my little house, crying," Weimer recalled.

When he landed in Hawaii, Weimer said, the NSA promised him his fiancee would be flown out of Vietnam. Instead, his passport was confiscated to keep him from trying a last-minute rescue effort on his own. He couldn't even use the agency's teletype cable to try to locate Le Hoang.

Back at NSA headquarters in Washington, Weimer was stripped of his top-secret clearance and told he'd be fired if he didn't stop all attempts to communicate with Le Hoang. Though he has since heard from her aunt in this country that Le Hoang eventually made it safely to France, Weimer has lost touch with her.

Weimer quit the NSA. When he suffered a nervous breakdown, he tried to get worker's compensation for a job-related disability. But because Weimer loyally refused to divulge details of his ultrasensitive work in Vietnam, even in therapy, he could not establish that his emotional troubles were job-related.

Last year, Weimer finally told a psychiatrist what his job had been in Saigon: analyzing enemy troop movements from reconnaissance reports and pinpointing targets for air strikes. His analyses could have caused the deaths of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians, and Weimer has recurring hallucinations about "children aflame with napalm jelly and the screaming and crying of civilians."

The psychiatrist diagnosed Weimer's emotional disorder as post-traumatic syndrome—a type of delayed stress many Vietnam veterans have experienced. The doctor reported that Weimer's pent-up wartime memories finally boiled over during therapy.

Weimer is understandably bitter. "I tried to be a good citizen," he told our associate Corky Johnson. "But now I wish I had never heard of the NSA. I understand now why people stand by the Vietnam Memorial and blow their brains out."